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ABSTRACT

Communication researchers should ask more explicit questions concerning the processes by which mediated messages can create, modify, or reinforce beliefs about social actors and social environments. There are four general categories into which to divide variables concerning processing strategies for mediated social information: source characteristics, message characteristics, social inference heuristics, and cognitive style. Three types of circumstances may be distinguished which influence how people account for mediation: a message recipient's goals in processing the message; the domain of social information conveyed in the message; and the relationship between prior social information and that conveyed by a message. The dialectic between theories of mind and theories of social impact is not simple or straightforward. Elucidation of how messages of various kinds are processed should lead to much more focused examination of the conditions and circumstances under which ambitious theories of media effect are likely or unlikely to hold. (Fifty-five references are attached.) (MG)

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Social Cognitive Approaches to Media Effects Research

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Social Cognitive Approaches to Media Effects Research

Abstract

This paper relates social cognition research to media effects questions. The purpose of the paper is a) to identify key variables concerning the processing of mediated social information that may be better studied and understood from a social cognitive perspective, b) to briefly review social cognition literature relevant to those variables, and c) to highlight some implicit assumptions in media effects theories that may be examined and tested from a social cognitive perspective.

Keywords: media effects, social cognition, information processing, social reality

Social Cognitive Approaches to Media Effects Research

Cappella & Street (1989) argue that communication researchers should attend more closely to heuristics that guide the processing of messages and to the subsequent mental representations of message content. I am concerned here with a class of message content--information about people--and the particular heuristics and cognitive processing strategies used to deal with information about people. I will identify some relevant media effects research questions and theories, and examine them in terms of social cognitive mechanisms which might underlie putative effects.

Social cognitions as dependent variables

A first useful distinction when discussing social cognition in the context of media effects research is between social cognitions as as a term describing thoughts and beliefs concerning people and the social environment, and social cognition as a term describing how information about people and the social environment is processed. Social cognitions have increasingly become a focal point of mass communication research. There have been studies of media effects on perceptions of appropriate sex roles (e.g., Pingree, 1978; Tan, 1979); racial stereotyping (e.g., Dorr, 1982; Pierce, 1980); and crime and society (e.g., Doob & McDonald, 1979; Gerbner et al., 1979; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Hawkins & Pingree, 1980; see Greenberg, 1982 for a review of

media and socialization literature). In most cases, such studies have been concerned with the effects of exposure to media stimuli on change in, or reinforcement of, social cognitions. Relatively little attention has been paid to contingencies and intervening processes that may determine the circumstances under which media stimuli will or will not influence social cognitions. As Reeves, Chaffee, & Tims (1982:292) comment:

> Much of the empiricism related to mass communication has attempted to catalog associations between media content and response...without much empirical or theoretical regard for the cognitive mechanisms involved. Even with the recent shift to cognitive variables...few explanations have been proposed that describe the cognitive processes that might explain how mass media bring about these results.

Social cognition in mass communication research--defining the research questions

Cognitive psychology has provided a rich source of theory and research regarding processes of attention, memory organization, storage and retrieval mechanisms, and heuristics used in making judgments. Such research should prove invaluable in understanding the processing of mediated messages. And certainly, if there are aspects of cognitive processing that are peculiar to social stimuli--information about people and human events--then these aspects should be

invaluable in understanding the influence of various media on social beliefs. Are there distinctive ways in which people think about social stimuli? What is the interplay between new social information and social information and social information people already have in memory? How do people evaluate and make inferences from social information in a message? Such questions are central to an understanding of the influence of messages on subsequent beliefs.

If consideration of cognitive process is limited to encoding, recognition, storage, and retrieval activities, few functions unique to social stimuli are likely to be found (Glucksberg, 1981). However, there is considerable work being done, and yet to be done, in applying these general theories to social stimuli. For example, Cantor & Mischel (1977) applied Rosch's (1976) work on object perception to categorization of person types. A number of researchers (e.g., Hastie & Carlston, 1980; Wyer & Srull, 1986) have proposed information processing models for social stimuli. More recent research (e.g., Srull, Lichtenstein, & Rothbart, 1985; Wyer & Martin, 1986) has explored how various aspects of memory for people may be organized, and how search and retrieval activities may take place. These lines of research offer insight into particular mass communication research questions regarding media effects, such as how best to conceptualize outcomes such as stereotypes or beliefs about social group members, or how to conceptualize the processing of messages at varying levels of familiarity.

Starting with Asch's (1946) studies of the effects of primes such as describing a person as "warm" or "cold" on subsequent impressions, there has been an interest in the impact of prior expectations on the processing of social stimuli and on the formation of person impressions. This interest is particularly relevant to media effects research: Media effects on social beliefs must depend upon how prior beliefs influence the processing of messages, and upon how messages in turn shape subsequent beliefs.

Hastie (1980) has examined the effects of incongruent social information--information inconsistent with beliefs about probable social behaviors for given social actors--on memory and recall, finding that incongruent information tends to be better remembered. Carlston (1980) also examines the effects of incongruent information on memory, including the effects of new information on recall of previously observed information, and varying effects on recall of trait attributions versus recall of specific actions portrayed in the stimulus.

Since media effects research is concerned with the influence of new information contained in mediated messages on existing social beliefs, the questions this kind of research raises are particularly relevant. For example, when is incongruent or discrepant information especially noticeable and easily recalled? When is it overlooked, quickly lost in the flood of ongoing information, or avoided

because it is too difficult to process?

The problem of how people draw inferences from social information has also received considerable attention. Schema researchers (e.g., Weber & Crocker, 1983; see Crocker, Fiske, & Taylor, 1984 for a review) have examined the effects of differing amounts and proportions of discrepant information on beliefs and organization of beliefs about social group traits. Psychologists have also just begun to consider the question of how people assess and draw inferences about the normativeness of specific behaviors (Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Nisbett & Kunda, 1985), in contrast to inferences about traits.

Social inference process is a social cognition question central to theories of media effects. Implicit in pluralistic ignorance and spiral of silence theories (Katz, 1983; Noelle-Neumann, 1974; O'Gorman & Garry, 1976), for example, are assumptions about social inference processes. The pluralistic ignorance hypothesis suggests that individuals do not generalize from their own behavior in assessing norms, but rather perform some kind of cognitive algebra to deduce these norms from observations of the behavior of others. When certain of these behaviors are covertly performed, these deductions produce a distorted picture of reality. Perhaps a next step, from a social cognitive viewpoint, might be to distinguish the domains of behavior--or the types of people--for which or for whom external observation is in fact

preferred to generalization from oneself as a heuristic (e.g. Snyder, 1979).

The spiral of silence hypothesis is even more extreme in its assertion that norms--in this case for expression of political and social views--are assessed from observation. Noelle-Neumann goes a good deal further than pluralistic ignorance theorists when she argues that mediated information, rather than observed behavior, is the primary source of data for these assessments of norms. This argument, then, would be most defensible when applied to those societies or societal groups among whom political and social expression is relatively covert or rare, or among individuals with limited social exposure. One might also expect media to be a particularly important source of information about societal norms--as against proximal norms--(e.g., Tyler & Cook, 1984) and for assessments of norms of other subcultures within society or cultures from other societies, since direct observation does not provide much data about such groups.

This process of assessment and inference about group norms, then, is a particularly interesting area for media effects research. Media may provide a plentiful source of instances of social behavior that may or may not (given contingencies that will be developed below) be used in the assessments of central tendencies and ranges of behaviors known as "norms" (Kahneman & Miller, 1986).

Social cognitive processing of mediated messages

In the preceding section, the relationship between new information conveyed in a message and information in memory, and processes by which people may draw inferences from social information in a message, were discussed. In this section, I will take a systematic look at deriving research questions and identifying useful variables by taking a social cognitive perspective on the processing of mediated messages.

Reeves, Chaffee, & Tims (1982: 294) raise the question as to the consequences of mediation for the processing of social information. If audience members in general have distinctive strategies for processing social information conveyed via mediated messages, one may ask what the consequences of these distinctive strategies are for how media may influence beliefs and actions. These strategies, if they exist, would serve as intervening processes between the message stimulus and the cognitive or behavioral outcome. They should then suggest specific contingency or intervening variables that should help explain variance in the effects of media stimuli.

Varying strategies for processing mediated social information

There are four general categories in which to divide variables concerning processing strategies for mediated social information: source characteristics, message characteristics, social inference heuristics, and cognitive style.

1. Source characteristics. Source characteristics are familiar variables to mass communication researchers. Journalism research has long focussed on assessing the credibility of news media (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986), though this research has for the most part been concerned with global assessments of media credibility rather than variance in assessments of messages. Source credibility, of course, was the focal point of several classic studies in persuasion (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953).

Surprisingly, there has been relatively little research attention paid to the effects of fictional or non-fictional attribution of a message. This is an especially interesting social cognition problem inherent in processing social information. Non-fictional portrayals of people are ostensibly of actual, flesh-and-blood human beings, comparable in that respect to observed social information. Fictional portrayals have a more problematic origin in the message originator's imagination. There is some evidence that apparent factuality of portrayals influences message processing in a number of respects, including attention to discrepant information in a message and possibly the intensity of cognitive activity occasioned by the message (, 1988).

2. Message characteristics. Several message variables are of particular interest with regard to the portrayal of people and human events. First, what is the rhetorical style of the message? Is it anecdotal, a report

of quantitative facts (base-rate information, in Tversky & Kahneman's (1982) formulation), globally descriptive (offering generalized assertions and traits), or some combination of the three?

Each type of message leads us into a consideration of different kinds of cognitive process. Anecdotal information may be considered an instance of social observation best described by processes of person impression and memory. Global description may address only traits attributed to categories independent of what is understood from each instance--which may involve distinctly different kinds of memory (Carlston, 1980; Wyer & Martin 1986). Little research has been done concerning the assimilation of statistical information into person or group impressions in memory, though there is considerable interest in the inferential use and abuse of such information (e.g., Edwards, 1982).

Other variables of interest include stylistic issues. For example, how does the cognitive processing of dramatically gripping and emotionally evocative messages versus dull messages differ? What of the effect on processing of the vividness of a message--the amount and quality of detail that may leave a more convincing and realistic impression independent of factuality or fictionality? What are the effects on different dimensions of processing of humor in its many forms? What--recalling Hastie (1980), Carlston (1980), and Weber & Crocker (1983)--of incongruities

and inconsistencies in portrayals or descriptions conveyed in the message?

3. Social inference heuristics. Social inference strategies--or heuristics, as Tversky & Kahneman (1973) refer to them--in some respects are counterparts to message variables. Message characteristics regarding social information--such as vividness or dullness, anecdotes or statistics, incongruities with typical expectations regarding group members--are intentionally or unintentionally imposed by the message author or producer. However, given any single message, readers or viewers may make varying assessments of the message with respect to these characteristics, depending on several additional factors.

For example, any assessments made of the congruity or incongruity of portrayals should be dependent in part upon prior expectations regarding those portrayals. Assessment of the vividness and seeming lifelikeness of the social information will be a subjective judgment, influenced perhaps by aesthetic preferences with respect to the message and prior interest in message content as well as by the nature of the message itself. Judgments concerning the representativeness of the social information portrayed for populations beyond those presented in the message may depend on both assessments of congruity and the amount of prior information held with respect to the message topic.

4. Cognitive style. There are two sets of issues regarding differences in how people are likely to

take cognizance of the fact of mediation. One issue regards differences in orientation to social information such as self-monitoring, or the degree to which persons tend to focus on external social cues (Snyder, 1979). Persons who are focussed on such cues may be more attentive and perhaps more influenced by social information in messages than those persons who focus more on internal cues, at least in socially salient domains (Bogozzi & Schnedlitz, 1985; Shepherd, 1985).

More familiar to mass communication researchers is the question of differences in the ability to distinguish mediated information from non-mediated information. This has been referred to as the perceived reality of mediated information (Greenberg & Reeves, 1976; Hawkins, 1977; Reeves, 1978). Perceived reality is often but not always based upon developmental differences. This research has also highlighted the multiplicity of dimensions that comprise the perceived reality concept, a multiplicity that Potter (1986) also found to be true of adults.

Perceived reality is conceptually similar to message processing heuristics, in that both are proposed to serve as intervening variables between message stimulus and cognitive or behavioral response which represent implicit criteria for message assessment and inference. However, they are also different. Perceived reality refers to generalized assessments of a media, e.g. television, as a depiction of reality. Social inference heuristics are concerned with the

dimensions along which specific messages are assessed as a plausible representation of some social actors and environment. Social inference heuristics do seem to be influenced by stylistic differences similar to those that determine perceived reality (, 1988). Perhaps such heuristics may suggest mechanisms underlying judgments of perceived reality based on exposure to specific programs or messages.

Varying circumstances influencing message assessment and social inference

Besides various ways people take mediation of social information into account, there are also the circumstances which influence how people account for mediation. Three types of circumstances may be distinguished: a message recipient's goals in processing the message, the domain of social information conveyed in the message, and the relationship between prior social information and that conveyed by a message.

1. Processing goals. An important determinant in how people cognitively organize social information is their purpose or intent when they observe the social stimulus. For example, Ebbesen (1980), following up Newtson & Engquist's (1976) work on the perception of ongoing social behavior, found that instruction set--or the assigned task, such as recall or impression formation--would influence the way subjects broke up ongoing social information into meaningful chunks. Certainly, too, someone's purpose in exposing herself to a

message is likely to determine her level of involvement in that message: flipping through a magazine in the dentist's waiting room versus studying an article for an examination or an article that purports to describe members of a group--e.g. academics--of which she is a part (e.g., Anderson, 1985; Cacioppo & Petty, 1985; Greenwald & Leavitt, 1985).

2. Relationship between message content and prior information/beliefs. I have mentioned in several contexts already the issue of possible discrepancies between social information contained in the message and prior beliefs regarding the social environment. Discrepancies, in turn, are likely to depend upon another factor, familiarity--the extent to which people do or do not have prior beliefs or knowledge about the message topic.

Clearly, one can find confirming or discrepant information in a message only insofar as one can access relevant information in memory. There is, as described earlier, a body of research regarding the effects of such confirming or discrepant information on existing beliefs about social group members. Much less is known about the effects of new information on categories in which message recipients have virtually no prior knowledge (Crocker, Fiske, & Taylor, 1984). This particular case is of particular importance in theorizing about media effects on beliefs about the social world.

For example, dependency theory asserts that media are

most influential on those people in a society who must rely heavily on mediated sources of information, when social circumstances are relatively uncertain, and in those societies in which the mass media carry a large share of the societal information load. It is a natural extension of this argument to suggest (cf. Adoni, Cohen, & Mane, 1984; Elliott & Rosenberg, 1987) that the less alternative information a given individual has about a given topic, the more heavily dependent that individual will be on the media for information about that topic. In other words, one can hypothesize that lesser prior familiarity with a message topic should lead to greater effects of that mediated message. Experimental research suggests that this is the case when prior familiarity consists of direct personal experience (Wu & Shaffer, 1987), but not necessarily when prior experience is confined to prior media or educational exposure (, 1988).

3. Domain of social information conveyed in message. In mass communication research, social cognitions are commonly referred to as if a single conceptual unit. In important respects, they are not. For example, the two types of social cognitions that have received greatest attention in the mass communication literature are perceptions of social risk (Doob & McDonald, 1979; Gerbner et al, 1979; Hawkins & Pingree, 1980) and beliefs about members of social groupings, especially minorities and women (Dorr, 1982; Pierce, 1980; Pingree, 1978; Tan, 1979). From the point of view of the

psychological literature, these are very different kinds of outcomes, linked to different intervening processes and probably organized differently in memory (Hamilton, 1981; Slovic, Fischhoff, & Lichtenstein, 1982; Weber & Crocker, 1983; Wyer & Martin 1986).

Theories that attempt to describe socialization influences of the media on social cognitions will eventually have to take into account differences in the organization and processing of various types of social cognitions. For example, Tyler & Cook (1984) found differential effects of media stories concerning risks on subject estimates of average risks for people in general, versus risk for the subjects themselves.

It also is worth noting that research has focussed on two domains of social cognitions, but that these are neither the only nor necessarily the most important such domains. For example, beliefs about self and social identity vis a vis others are likely of crucial importance in both behavior and subjective experience of well-being, yet are only tangentially addressed by inquiries into perceptions of group members. Media effects on beliefs about appropriate rules for intergroup (as opposed to interpersonal) interaction also have not been much explored, yet in the aggregate may have implications for social relations within a society and for relations between societies.

Summary remarks

In this paper, I have argued that we as communication researchers should ask more explicit questions concerning the processes by which mediated messages can create, modify, or reinforce beliefs about social actors and social environments. A number of approaches to social cognition research with respect to their implications for problems in media effects research have been reviewed.

The dialectic between theories of mind and theories of social impact is not simple or straightforward. One cannot expect to prove or disprove social-level theories by examining their implicit assumptions about cognitive processing mechanisms. Elucidation of how messages of various kinds are processed, however, should lead to much more focussed examination of the conditions and circumstances under which ambitious theories of media effect are likely or unlikely to hold. Equally important, additional research questions and research programs may be identified, and unanticipated types of effects may well be uncovered.

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